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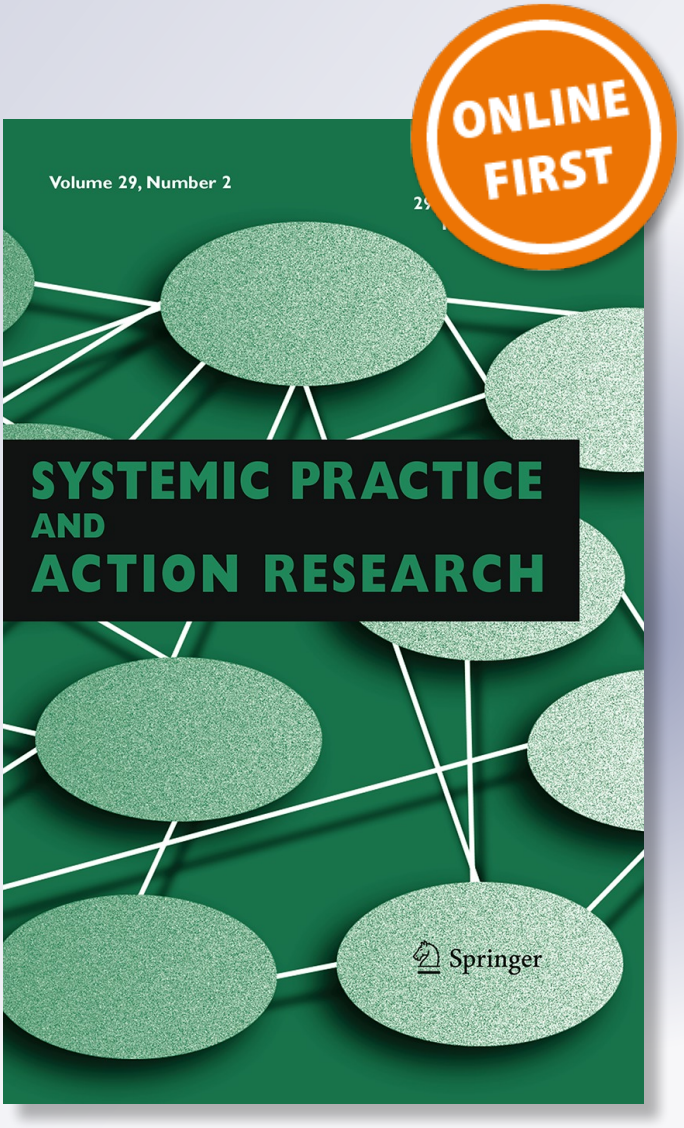

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Place Marketing and Management: A Complex Adaptive Systems View. The Strategic Planning of the City of Avellino, Italy

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Abstract The objective of this work is to contribute to place management and marketing studies by looking at the territory, as a complex adaptive system aiming to reach a dynamic equilibrium—a steady state. According to this approach, the territorial system emerges as a result of its capacity, its social actors and governance, and the analysis, creation and maintenance of relationships—the dynamics—between the territory components, both tangible and intangible ones, and its many and varied stakeholders. These relational dynamics produce continuous and reciprocal adaptive behaviours among social actors who determine, influence, and adapt the vision of the territory. Through an interdisciplinary approach, we evaluate the recent literature on town planning and geography, aiming to bridge the gap in place management and marketing literature. We propose a framework based on systemic and complexity theory and propose a novel approach that supports decision makers in modelling the future scenario, taking choices regarding place management and place marketing.

Keywords Place marketing · Place management · Complex adaptive systems · Multiagents analysis · Avellino city strategic planning

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Introduction

Territories can be considered as self-organized complex systems (Basile and Dominici 2016) created not only by the interactions between the various elements—social, cultural, economic, and political—but through the interactions these elements have with relevant stakeholders. Since the earliest models of urban dynamics, the territory has been seen as a complex system of different variables at different levels (Allen and Sanglier 1979; Wilson 1981; Warnaby et al. 1998). These different subjects, and the related forces, have to be managed in order to become constituencies of a community able to satisfy the needs of each of its parts and, moreover, of attracting new resources—in the form of new businesses and new visitors—as an inherent part of the process of reaching its organizational goals (Kotler et al. 1993).

In particular modelling local area as a complex system helps in avoiding the shortfalls of the standard economic models looking for a short-term optimisation using a mono-disciplinary approach (Becker and Ostrom 1995; Berkes et al. 2003). It helps in taking into account that in the area there are various actors with different temporal, spatial and social scales; they operate in nested hierarchies leading to multidimensional interactions and an inevitable uncertainty; but, as a consequence, the systems properties cannot be planned beforehand but they have to be considered as emerging ones dynamically changing over times interaction after interaction (Berkes et al. 2003; Gunderson and Holling 2002). Managing towns as a complex system helps in integrating different form of knowledge involving relevant stakeholders, both internal and external ones, at the earliest in the decision making processes (Freeman 1984; Abel 1998; Warnaby et al. 1998; Pahl-Wostl 2002). It follows that, if we want to understand the interactions between these various parts, and how they affect the system capability, as a whole, to reach a dynamic equilibrium, we have to read places using systems thinking and complexity theory (Ashworth and Voogd 1994; Stacey et al. 2000; Barile et al. 2013).

The umbrella of methodological approaches of "Systems Thinking" has developed in contexts relating to organization and management science (Beer 1966, 1979, 1981) as a way of obtaining a richer framework of understand the increasing complexity of modern contexts, acknowledging the recursive and non-linear effects involving its various parts (Basile and Dominici 2016; Dominici and Palumbo 2013; Pitasi and Dominici 2012). This perspective makes clear that uncertainty and the non-linear processes of change and innovation are important features of social change— but at the same time, they are the specific models, dynamics, and mechanisms driving social change (De Haan et al. 2006; Dominici 2012).

In place marketing and territory studies, a systemic approach becomes functional in management objectives, enabling the territory to differentiate from other territories, or interconnect with them, as part of the competitive and cooperative dynamics that result from the distinctive characteristics of the economic, political, and social dynamics (Barile 2008).

Following a review of the literature on Complex Systems Theory (CST) and their effects on place marketing, we analyse the role of complex adaptive systems and multi-agent analysis in developing a framework to understand or implement place-planning processes. We then apply this process to the strategic planning of the city of Avellino (Italy).

Theoretical Background: Systems Thinking and Complex Systems Theory

Systems Thinking

The theories under the umbrella of Systems Thinking trace their roots in the 1950 s in numerous, seemingly disparate, disciplines (Ackoff 1971; Midgley 2000; Varela et al. 1974; Von Bertalanffy 1956) perpetrating the attempts of the Macy conferences and of cybernetics (Wiener 1948) to promote meaningful communication across scientific disciplines and to build a "general systems theory" (von Bertalanffy 1971) as the foundation on which to base the construction of a useful model that represents dynamic systems in various fields of knowledge. The common factor of systems theories is the characteristic of allowing the emergence of a universal language that serves to direct and contextualize complex models of interaction between different components of the system, in the context of complex adaptive systems (Gell-Man 1994; Gunderson and Holling 2002; Holland 1995; Kauffman 1995).

Systems thinking has been found to be useful in several disciplines, such as sociology (Giddens 1985; Luhmann 1984), economics (Allen 2001; Boulding 1970), ecology (Gunderson and Holling 2002), political science (Kickert 1991; Vickers 1983; Kemp et al. 2007; Rotmans et al. 2001), business (Beer 1979, 1981) and organizations (Beer 1966; Senge 1990).

Systemic approaches were born to overcome, the traditional reductionist-analytical methodology adopted to analyze complex phenomena by considering the interactions emerging from the heterogeneous autonomous parts (Dominici and Levanti 2011). While considering the whole in a holistic way, systemic theories are at the same time able to highlight the specific and autonomous identity of the single parts and the impact of on the whole system. The whole and the parts are two different levels that coexist in the system; being the evolutionary dynamics of the system the result of the emergence from the interaction between these two levels (Baum 1999; McKelvey 1999; Dominici and Levanti 2011). In other words holistic and reductionist approaches are not antagonist but complementary (Di Bernardo and Rullani 1990; Tagliagambe and Usai 1994; Fontana and Ballati 1999; Anderson 1999; Golinelli 2010; Dominici and Levanti 2011).

The systemic approach focuses on the system as a dynamic whole, taking into account the dynamic interactions between its parts, in order to obtain a holistic perspective on the paths of action occurring in a given territory and how they help shape it (Stacey et al. 2000). The focus on "emerging" conditions in properties associated with the territory—which are necessary for the creation and maintenance of interactions between social actors and those actors and the relevant stakeholders—gives systems thinking theory a bottom-up approach (Pumain 2005).According to Batty and Torrens (2001) systems thinking focuses on the interactions on the microlevel as the source of the effects found in the macro one and, as a consequence, it has the ability to exhibit emergent properties, that *give rise to a "surprise" for the observer.*

Adopting the above mentioned approach in managing a given territory has been considered useful in increasing the local area's potential to successfully differentiate itself from other local areas, as a direct consequence of its own distinctive economic, political, and social dynamics (Barile 2008). Accordingly, its main focus has been on the identification of *attractors* stimulating these dynamics, and the way in which they affect the innovative potential of a given uncertain environment and the change in social interaction norms (Pumain 2005).

The subsequent awareness of individuality—whether created, stimulated, or detected as part of the dynamics performed in the identified geographic space—allows management to define a specific identity to communicate to defined town's stakeholders, as a way of creating relationships and of maintaining existing ones in a sustainable way, while adapting to the emerging changes affecting the system and its parts (Ashworth and Voogd 1994).

The systems thinking approach to place management acknowledges the need to create and maintain relationships between stakeholders, as these actors hold the resources needed to implement a sustainable territory survival process (Freeman 1984; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Using systems thinking and complexity theory, these processes function as place-marketing activities that contribute towards achieving a dynamic equilibrium between the interests of the various parts (Freeman 1984; Abel 1998; Warnaby et al. 1998; Pahl-Wostl 2002).

Complex Systems Theory

The field of complex system theory includes various research approaches among which we can identify three main streams (Dominici and Levanti 2011): the Santa Fe Institute perspective (Gleick 1987; Waldrop 1992; Kauffman 1993; Casti 1997); the European perspective (Prigogine and Stengers 1979, 1981, 1984; Nicolis and Prigogine 1987), and the European epistemological tradition (Piaget 1970, 1971; Morin 1977).

The properties of Complex Systems Theory that can be useful to our aim are (McCarthy et al. 2000; Dominici and Levanti 2011):

- *Emergence* The birth of new systemic behaviours, paths and properties of networked systems from spontaneous interactions among agents;
- *Self-Organization* The unplanned creation of augmented order, emerging from the internal dynamics of the system as learning, process variation, tuning and improvement (Kauffman 1993);
- *Path dependence* The overall behaviour of the complex system depends on the stimuli received and the structural elements of the system that derive from past stimuli and behaviors Hence historical contingencies have a role, influencing the structure and the behaviour of the agents in the system (Arthur 1989; Bertelè 1994);
- *Operational closure and thermodynamic openness* The system is autonomous. Its invariant organization allows to identify the system itself, in each space–time momentum regardless of its specific structure (Bertschinger et al. 2006);
- *Co-evolution and learning* Each agent in the system need to continuously adapt to the other agents in the system and to the external stimuli, in order to operate its semi-autonomous strategies, (Anderson 1999; Lewin and Volberda 1999; Volberda and Lewin 2003; Pahl-Wostl 2007).

Complex adaptive systems are basically multilevel (McKelvey 1997). In other words the interactions between agents take place and can be analysed at different levels. This implies that we can define other levels than the whole and the part, which are sub-systems of a number of intermediate levels between the whole and the part (Dominici and Levanti 2011).

Another relevant characteristic of these systems is their "tangled composite" structures, allow to outline several levels of analysis and highlight a number of semi-autonomous processes. Agent operating at each of the levels of analysis co-evolve interacting with other levels of the system. (Anderson 1999).

In order to identify the levels of analysis in the territorial system, it is necessary to analyse the interrelated systemic relations and their different degrees of force, and dyadic or multiple significance that form the connective architecture of the complex system. We can classify the levels of analysis and interaction in a complex adaptive system in three complementary and cohesisting levels (Dominici and Levanti 2011):

– *Micro-systemic* regarding the single agent;
– *Meso-systemic* considering the agents connected with strong links;
– *Macro-systemic* involving the whole system network.

Each of these three levels interacts and coevolves with the other levels

Place Marketing and Multiagent Analysis

The disciplines of marketing, communication, and management rely on assumptions of the emergence of identity on which to create and maintain relationships between various agents in order to satisfy their needs. Considering the town, it is of key relevance to take into account the connections between the attributes of the different agents (their representations and their behaviours) and the collective properties that emerge from their social interactions (Warnaby et al. 1998; Pahl-Wostl 2002). Indeed, exchange itself is a key concept inherited from marketing, in that it creates value— that is, it leaves the two sides participating in the exchange in a better condition than at the outset (Kotler 1967).

Accordingly, place marketing can be described thus: "[…] *Place marketing succeeds when stakeholders, such as citizens, workers, and business firms derive satisfaction from their community, and when visitors, new businesses, and investors find their expectations met.* […] *Place marketing means designing a place to satisfy the needs of its target markets* […]" (Kotler et al. 1993, p. 37).

The urban area or town can be studied (and governed) by interpreting the economic, political, and social dynamics that take place between the different actors within geographical boundaries—ephemeral though these may be.

Depending on the various possible applications, the place can be understood as a space that supports the movement of social agents (Page et al. 1998); as a resource for agents using its attributes for their activities (Epstein and Axtell 1996); as a complex group including the agents and the objects that make them up (Bura et al. 1996); as a field of communication or semantics for agents (Drogoul and Ferber 1992); or as an entity with its own dynamics (Bousquet and Gautier 1999).

Of course, these agents are entities that interact with other agents that cooperate with them, competing between themselves or simply coexisting in the same local area. They behave in a way that is both responsive and cognitive, besides learning and adapting, in time changing their behaviour based on past experience or according to the chances of success in the future. Agents are able to act on and influence the place and to behave according to the resources, their observations, knowledge, and interactions. Within this framework, interactions between individual agents can aggregate in fluxes (in migration, tourism, and investment), thus affecting the structure of the system as a whole and its marketing and management planning; they are essential for its subsequent emergence before the relevant stakeholders, with the role of suprasystems (Golinelli 2010), influencing the qualitative and quantitative evolution of territorial entities.

These numerous interactions characterize a key property of complex adaptive systems that is the indeterminate outcomes. In other words, the complex recursive interactions deriving from the interdependencies and from the mutual causality among agents, reduce the relevance of the distinction between dependant and independent variables (Dominici and Levanti 2011). So we can claim that the indeterminacy is the negation of the cause-effect paradigm of reductionism.

On this scientific base some research approaches to the territory—mainly coming from urban and geographical studies—tend to represent and study it with multiagent systems. The analysis is often handled by software, including passive attributes and active rules, and taking into account certain types of component in the territory.

Multiagent systems methodology is particularly useful as simulation tool in modelling dynamics—in particular when the individual characteristics and their interactions are markedly heterogeneous and are typical of complex systems (Levin et al. 2013). These systems allow the analyst to adopt both qualitative and quantitative methodologies looking, at the same time, at different organizational levels, employing different time scales in order to comprehend these relationships as a dynamic event. They are particularly valuable when, for example, the environment becomes more dynamic. The dynamic interaction of multiple agents, reduces the probability that a given marketing and management plan will remain valid throughout its execution. This isdue to the uncertainty about other agents' future actions. To overcome this problem for the planning process the computer aided simulation of the interactions can help to predict both the town positioning and the effects of a given behaviour in the target perception (Sawhney and Prandelli 2000; Ashmos et al. 2000). Before defining the symulation model, it is necessary to define the agents—that means to explore the possible future states of the system according our knowledge of the possible transitions, in order to evaluate which action best matches the agent's desires.

Town emergent properties are produced mainly on two levels, the micro and macro, which are represented in bottom-up and top-down emergence processes.

The microlevel properties are defined by the interactions between agents and social actors, and can be represented by the social and morphological structures of a city or territory emerging, bottom up, from multiple interactions among the residents or groups of citizens (e.g., indicators of structural dependency, association, and social cooperation). The emerging properties of the macrolevel are produced by:

- bottom up influences/relationship;
- continuous observation that governance conducts about the dynamics of relevant stakeholders (von Foerster 1984).

The governance, following a top–down process, calibrates the behaviour with thatof social actors and their social dynamics through rules and laws. They also create and manage the structural components of the urban area, so as to recognize its purpose based on the mission and vision that identify it.

In fact, as a result of their dynamic heterogeneity, their number, and their own continuous evolution, the actors will display different characteristics from their initial state.

Even failed processes will influence the system's evolution, as they will yield information about a range of possible future configurations of the system. This creates a relationship bridging the micro-level and the macro-level, as a given agent not only uses its failed planning processes to influence his own future actions, but can influence the temporal systems model of possible future states (i.e., the causal cone defined by every agent's actions) through the consequences of his own planning process.

The mutual influence between governance and social actors belonging to different sectors of society is, therefore, the cornerstone of this approach. In these networks based on social relationships, strategies and tactics are developed, negotiated, and implemented so as to bring changes to social structures that, in turn, will influence changes in patterns of government.

These dynamic and interactive processes have increasingly been the subject of studies (e.g., Edelenbos 1999; De Bruijn and Ten Heuvelhof 1997; Eising and Kohler-Koch 1999; Kickert et al. 1999; Milward and Provan 2000).

So, in addition to governance, other social actors play an active part in the interactive processes that create mutual influence (De Bruijn and Ten Heuvelhof 1997).

From Self-Organization to Place Governance and Marketing

According to this theoretical perspective, we hold that, in order to be sustainable, town governance models should take into account that:

- all social actors exert reciprocal influences that contribute to changes in the town system;
- the dynamics of change are the result of both top-down type planning and of network dynamics that determine reflexive behaviour;
- intercepting, driving and stimulating social change is a process of research, learning, and experimentation.

Taking into account these three main characteristics, towns become more the expression of the dynamics of self-organization than the result of specific activities planned or controlled by a single institution.

Self-organization is represented as a hierarchy of overlapping fragments that are impossible to totally enumerate or classify in a hierarchical manner (Dominici 2012). In fact, the emergent properties characterizing the relationships between the microlevels, mesolevels and macrolevels of the system contribute to maintaining his global regulation. The town system, therefore, is the result of multiple interactions that allow subsequent adjustments and progressive adaptation, which in turn are the expressions of external disturbances or endogenous innovations among agents playing at several levels (see Fig. 1).

As a result, the urban area is characterized by complex interactions. Faster communication speeds, coupled with more effective transportation systems, can thus greatly change the related dynamics. The more that transport systems converge, the stronger the effects will be on the system as a whole, driving more and more agents to interact. At the micro or local level (e.g., a city), the "centre" will enclose more and more urban space, connecting the periphery as well (Bretagnolle 2003). For example, the town of St. Denis is today part of the "hyper centre" of Paris, as a result of the introduction of high-speed transport and highways.

At the meso or interlocal and interurban levels, the effect is also related to the tighter network linking together the different cities and driving smaller urban centres to become components of "greater metropolitan areas".

The conception of towns as self-organized complex systems, then, is the result of interactions between elements on the microlevel and, through the town governance (mesolevel), between these elements and the institutional stakeholders (macrolevel). A

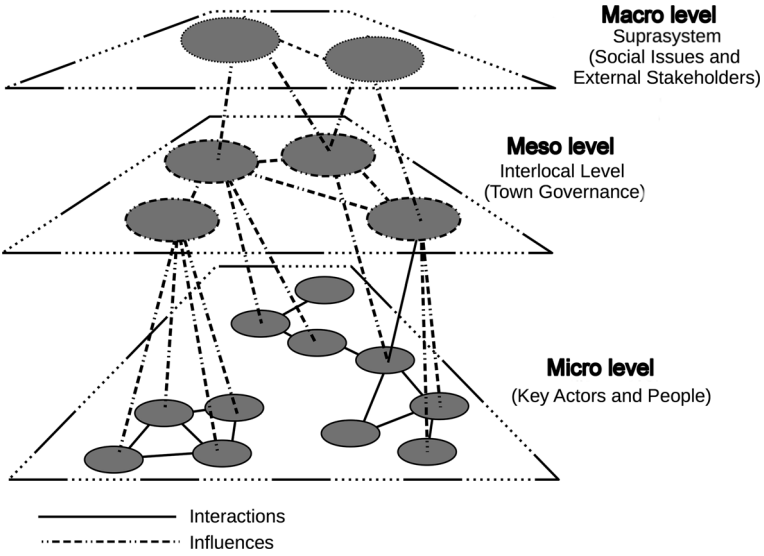

Fig. 1 Mutual relationship between social agents and place management at different systemic levels

similar approach to model urban area dynamics was described in the 1980s in several models using non-linear differential equations to describe, from one point of view, how the variables affecting the local area constituencies could change over time, starting from those

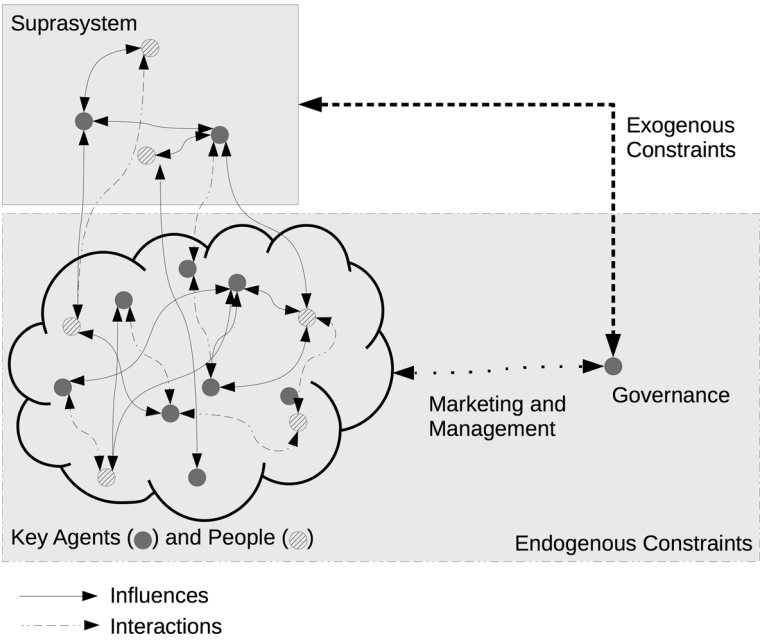

Fig. 2 Relationship between social agents and place management and suprasystems influences

interactions that have already been summarized in reports, guidelines, and standards (Allen and Sanglier 1979; Wilson 1981; Lombardo and Rabino 1984; Pumain et al. 1989).

Yet Systems add the attraction towards a condition of predetermined equilibrium to the no-linear interactions; it follows that internal fluctuations, or external disturbances, can cause a shock, a change in the model parameters, and thus drive towards the implementation of different policies. A classic example of this is when there's a significant change in the price of gasoline that can lead consumers to change their shopping behaviour towards large stores instead of small ones; this, in turn, can increase the concentration of commercial activities in one area or cause dispersion to different ones (Wilson 1981; Allen and Sanglier 1981).

Using the multiagent model, the urban area is represented as an aggregate of specific elements (strategic axes indicators), useful for competing or cooperating with other territories. These elements are the properties that emerge from the interactions and behaviours of the town constituencies, and are deeply influenced or represented by their cultural and historical values. This vision of urban area is coherent with a *resource-based* approach to place marketing (Wernerfelt 1984; Barney 1991).

The decision process to develop town-marketing policies for the survival of the territorial system can be represented by a *cognitive* attribute expressed by governance's strategic planning a set of marketing behaviours designed to meet stakeholders (e.g. tourists, founders, investors, et al.) needs, to create a stable relationship with them, and to adapt and maintain these relations over time (see Fig. 2).

Basing the approach on interactions affecting the dynamic equilibrium and survival of an area, this model identifies three types of interactions:

- proximity interactions;
- territorial interactions;
- interactions in specialized networks.

The first represents the various urban dynamics limited by the distance between "supply" and "demand"; these interactions are ruled by a dynamics that brings supply and demand closer together, from a territorial point of view. The second type, linked to political and administrative dynamics, is limited by geographical boundaries. Finally, the interactions that take town in *specialized networks* are not limited by the spatial territory, but rather follow the needs of the specific set of exchanges that has been brought into existence for the network—for example, information and communication technologies are produced in China, but the income is transferred in countries with low taxation, while the related distribution systems are usually located in countries where demand is most concentrated.

According to the framework presented above, the urban area is thus an expression of the set of relationships implemented by, and between, social and institutional agents, as well as being an expression of the indirect capacity of the territory to interact with other areas and agents (for example, national and international trade, migratory flows, and other factors).

The interactions are stimulated and influenced by typical *attractors* (Mattsson and Sørensen 2015), the territorial characteristics—whether tangible, like monuments, shopping centres, and natural resources, or intangible, like social, cultural, political, and economic distinctions. For example, the various ghettos or suburbs in metropolitan cities—the Little Italy, Jewish Quarter, and Chinatown—have become migratory tourist attractors; another example is fiscal laws in Cayman Island, a tax haven, that attract foreign investors.

This consideration is the opposite at the linear approaches that could produce no sustainable results when are not created on territorial specific characteristics but only on the

base of imitative behaviour hoping in a stimulus–response phenomenon (we could think at the creation of a big outlet in poor areas without trade history and adequate infrastructures with the certainty to develop economic and social conditions).

Based on the dynamics of complex adaptive systems, it is simple to frame the two-way relationship between attractors and social actors, in line with the cybernetic approach (Senge 1990).

In fact, the resulting relationship is far from straightforward, as the actors, subject to constant stimuli and influences, can modify the objectives that can be achieved by the attractors, reformulating behaviours of use or choosing a new place (we imagine migration for both social and entrepreneurial reasons).

Under such conditions, the attractors may also have to undergo adjustments to represent itself as an adequate response to the needs of actors.

This condition, therefore, reveals the importance of knowing and continuously monitoring the main characteristics of territorial actors in order to adapt the existing *attractors* and to create new and coherent ones (we could think at the creation of Disneyland in Paris. In this case the city adapts its offer to satisfy also the family needs.). Thus, the distinctive and attractive traits of a town are an *expression in progress* of an emerging phenomenon in the context of a Complex Adaptive System (city, region, or country) manifesting through a *self-organization* process—an expression of the adaptive choices of actors (Prigogine and Stengers 1981; Bertuglia and Vaio 2011).

So when planning strategy for the development or dynamic equilibrium of a town, the process conducted by governance must take into account that the complex system should be understood in a holistic manner discovering properties that are not readily explained by an understanding of its arts. For these reasons in the framework and case study below the authors analyse the context, the components and attractors of the territory, the suprasystems and their needs, and finally the needs and activities of the actors that make up the urban area community (Fig. 3).

The process of building a strategic plan for town dynamic equilibrium, as represented in Fig. 3, involves a set of specified stages of management, analysis, and monitoring of the urban dynamics by governance, and asks for collaboration between its relevant stakeholders (in particular, the social and economic community). This approach allows to individuate emergent properties that don't permit the analysis of the separate parts. For example, if we consider the interactions between local-area actors and agents belonging to other territories (or even different contexts), it is evident that the urban governance cannot

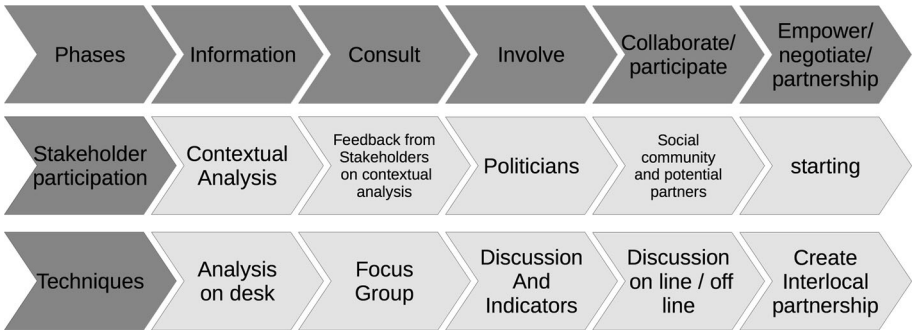

Fig. 3 Planning process framework

plan suitable strategies for these dynamics. This is a particularly strong effect in territories with internationally acclaimed products that are not able to generate a *country of origin* phenomenon, and are therefore not able to make the buyers of the products aware of the origin of the product in the geographical area itself. This, of course, demonstrates that the area of production, and therefore its governance, does not receive the beneficial effects from the commercialization of products, as a consequence of lack of policies that might support these economic activities.

If this analyses had been conducted on single parts wouldn't shown the emergent property as they would not been able to understand the interaction and the influences between them neglecting interesting opportunities to local area governance.

Research Methodology

In order to comprehend how the proposed theoretical framework, based on a Complex Adaptive Systems view, can be used to define the strategic directions in place marketing policies, we decided to present a case study about a Southern Italy town (Yin 2003).

The analysis of this case study allowed us to investigate the actor most closely linked to the true vocation of a given urban area, and later involve the local area's key agents.

Using this approach we have tried to understand the main objectives driving the town governance place marketing policies development and the social actors that they have involved in the process as a way to increase the effectiveness of the planning process itself.

Moreover, as this is a first example, we are not aiming to make a complete and thorough analysis, as each local area could be studied from different perspectives.

The urban area analysed is characterized by a socio-economic delay compared to the similar Northern Italy areas. For this reason the governance aim, with which we discussed to study this case, is to stimulate a socio-economic development that can include the neighbour areas.

For these reasons we decided to use mostly a sociodemographic and economic perspective, in order to identify the strategic direction that is more useful to stimulate the evolving of emergent proprieties for bridging possible gaps. The whole process, defined according to the Planning Process Framework outlined above is presented in the following Table 1.

Table 1 The analytical process

Phase	Subphase
Information	Sociodemographic analysis
	Analysis of economic activities
Consult and involve	Focus groups
Collaborate and participate	Development of a preliminary plan
Empower and negotiate partnership	Discussion of strategic directions

Case Study: A Synthesis of Avellino Strategic Planning

Our case study concerns Avellino City Strategic Planning. Avellino is a city in southern Italy, located 50 km from Naples and Salerno. Local governance has decided to develop a strategic plan to further the local area development, in both social and economic terms. Avellino is mostly a rural and artisan-manufacturing area.

The first perspective used in the information phase is the *sociodemographic point of view*.

In Avellino, the average age is 44 years old, but the over-65s make up about 25 % of the population; the population thus tends to be old. At the same time, the unemployment rate in the 20–35 age group is 23 %, so the over-65s represent a welfare safety net.

Only 9 % of the population has graduated from third-level education, but 70 % have high school qualifications. Young graduates prefer to emigrate as a consequence of low salaries. The average income per capita is about €14,000.

Using a perspective targeted on the *economic subsystem*, we have determined that the territory is characterized by the strong presence of firms operating in the food and wine business, effectively expressing its rural vocation. There is also a strong presence of local crafts, and there is an ever-present engineering industry, due to two industrial attractors, FMA and Irisbus (both part of the Fiat Group).

Moreover, we have found an increase in service and professional enterprises, stimulated by these businesses and the low incidence of capital to invest.

The territory expresses a marked propensity to export products, such as pasta, cereals, oil and wine—and it also has an interesting sensitivity to importing raw materials, such as copper, for metalworking.

In terms of the visits of the territory, the data registers modest values, with an average stay length of 2.4 days.

This leads us to an initial consideration. In particular, the equilibrium of trade expresses a poor use of the territory. In fact, the local products, which are usually an expression of "made in…" and, thus, of the country of origin phenomenon, are not actually capable of causing the opposite phenomenon—i.e. of stimulating perceptual positioning of the territory in the minds of foreign consumers so as to encourage visits.

The *consult and involve phase* action was carried out using thematic focus groups, conducted through discussions with key agents of the economy, labour and trade unions, mayors of neighbouring towns, and members of youth, health, and social cooperation forums. Later on, political representatives contributed, as part of a focus group, to better delineate the indicators based on the current or potential destinations of structural components (public and private buildings, places, and so on).

From these meetings, the first indications of strategic direction have emerged from three main subsectors: economy, culture, and quality of life.

These strategic directions are the results of the interactions between agents of 25 neighbouring towns, to identify the influences and interconnections between several topics such as mobility, broadband, waste management, energy and funds project management.

The *collaborate and participate* phase has been carried out by developing an initial, no-final version of the plan. This preliminary plan was later presented in a free discussion with the various urban area communities, in order to contextualize the path, the activities, and the actors involved in its implementation (school systems, social cooperation, and the economic sector).

The last phase—*empower, negotiate, partnership*—one is the phase in which the key agents define the strategic directions and the related communities begin to take shape.

The high level of unemployment, the migration of young people (mostly graduates) to other more industrialized Italian regions or to other countries, as well as the territory's vocation of food, wine, crafts, and manufacturing all confirm the need to develop a number of integrated actions in the areas of economy, culture, and quality of life.

In the first area, the plan asks for the creation of 'incubators' and spaces to help young people with business ideas that synergize with the territorial identity, in order to work together to become more competitive. To promote this initiative, the governance model has created a complex ecosystem consisting of investment funds, research centres and universities, businesses, and professionals to support phases of coaching.

In the area of culture, the plan asks institutional stakeholders to foster the emergence of a cultural district that would stimulate artistic enterprises in the territory to cooperate, and to use institutional structures in a coordinated and integrated way. Moreover, with the help of the school system, national universities, and international business, young graduates and the unemployed will be professionalized and assisted in finding satisfying jobs.

Finally, the quality of life in the area has been addressed by favouring public transportation, pedestrians, and cyclists; improving the energy independence of public facilities and stimulating even private actors to find similar solutions; last, but not least, the plan asks for improved integrated waste management.

These activities represent the contents of the strategic directions, which, in terms of marketing and communications, will represent the main assets, the foundations for leveraging in creating and maintaining the relationships with the suprasystems, in order to create a city brand and an online and offline communication plan.

Conclusions and Limitations of the Study

This work contributes to the advancement of place management and marketing studies by supplying an interdisciplinary framework. This framework relies on the assumption that awareness of the diversity and number of stakeholders guides observers and decision-makers in their interpretation and planning—the effects of which can only be evaluated in stochastic terms.

We assert that the development and application of models is useful when they can be integrated into existing knowledge, in order to produce new results and start-up conditions.

Therefore the systems approach shown in the present work gives to the governance a methodology to plan integrated initiatives, based on territorial identity, not finalized to produce sequential results but to create, with endogenous and exogenous agents, conditions adaptive and resources based that will have social, economic and cultural effects.

We show how this approach can be applied to the strategic planning for place marketing of a middle size Italian town (Avellino), for a better development of place marketing.

We are aware that the proposed methodological approach has both the limits and the advantages of qualitative research: it is not exhaustive, nor does it tend towards creation of a condition of replicability, but rather lends itself to a moment of reflection on meaningless 'best practice' research, with respect to the burgeoning complexity that influences contexts and relative economic and social phenomena.

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